

LISTEN

*a poetry quarterly
edited by*

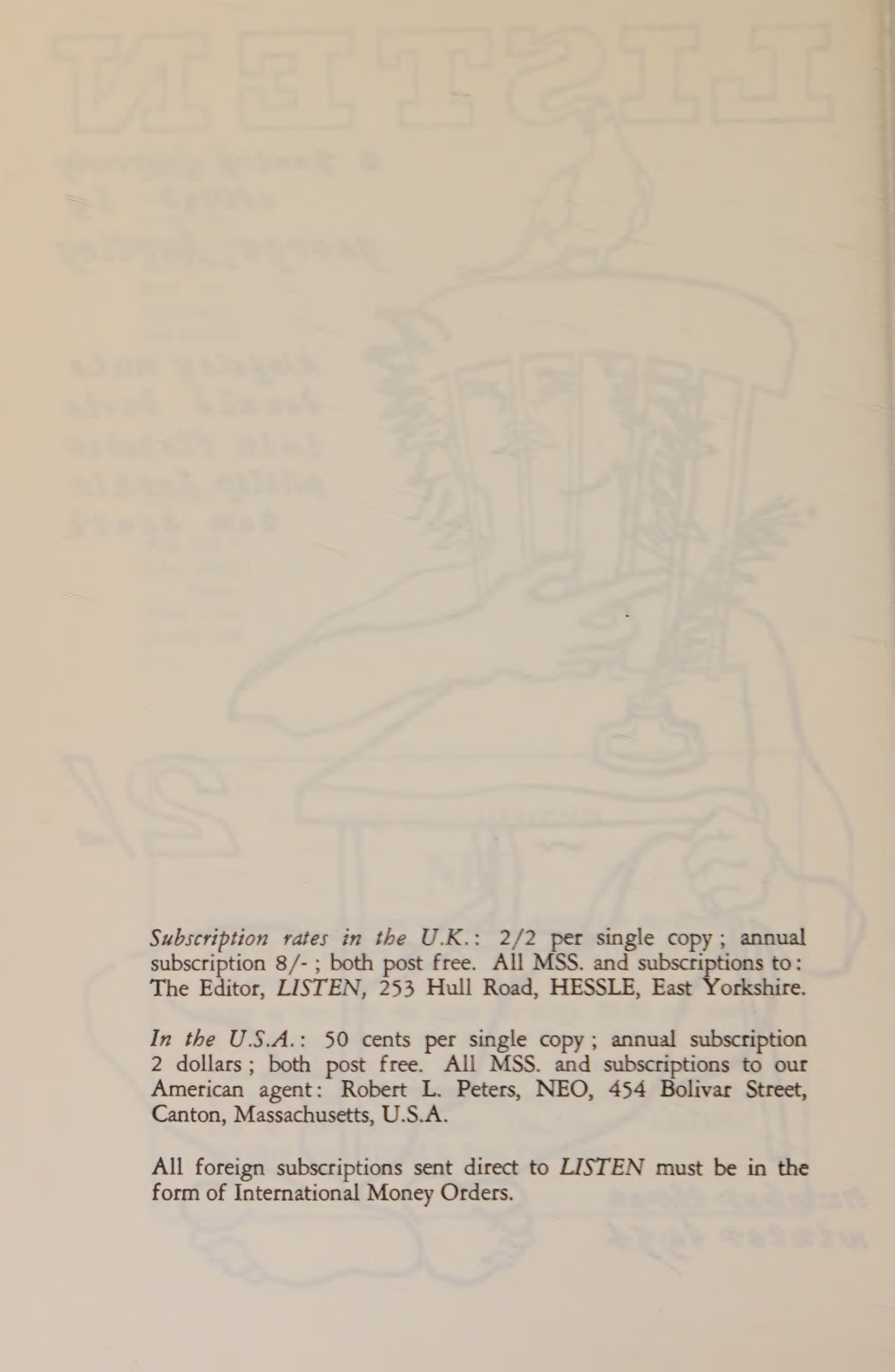
george hartley

*kingsley amis
donald davie
iain fletcher
philip larkin
tom scott*

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POETRY OF DEPARTURES

Philip Larkin

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
 As epitaph :
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off,
 And always the voice will sound
 Certain you approve
 This audacious, purifying,
 Elemental move.

And they are right, I think.
 We all hate home
 And having to be there :
 I detest my room,
 Its specially-chosen junk,
 The good books, the good bed,
 And my life, in perfect order ;
 So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
 Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like Then she undid her dress
Or Take that you bastard ;
 I can always do what he did !
 And knowing it, stay
 Sober and industrious.
 But I'd go today,

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
 Crouch in the fo'c'sle
 Stubbly with goodness, if
 It weren't so artificial,
 Such a deliberate step backwards
 To create an object :
 Books ; china ; a life
 Reprehensibly perfect.

 PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A FARMYARD
 FOWL

Donald Davie

Pluming himself upon a sense of sin
 (Lice in his feathers' undersides),
 He sported drab, the sooner Faith to win.

Old zealots were such sobersides ;
 He felt their gooseflesh crawl upon his skin,
 And hoped to feel their zeal besides.

Since then this would-be puritan has paced,
 A cock unmatched although so spurred ;
 Purist who crowed at shadows, he debased
 The rate of evil, and conferred
 Its rights on squalor, out of sheer good taste.
 No hag would ride on such a bird.

Dark plumes, though puritanical in cut,
 Still clothe the cock of the studied walk ;
 A conscious carriage must become a strut ;
 Fastidiousness can only stalk
 And seem at last not even tasteful, but
 A ruffled hen, about to squawk.

THE BRIDE OF REASON

Donald Davie

Pragmatical old Capulet, the head,
 So long has ruled, or seemed to rule, the heart,
 That Juliet muse, to County Paris wed,
 Lets his good sense determine all her art.

Charmed with his manners towards alternatives,
 The unacceptable Romeos she has kissed,
 The heart with this judicious husband lives,
 And, wed to Reason, seems a moralist.

Some who have loved the lady are dismayed ;
 Some who have loved her first love, Romeo,
 Think that impulsive gallant is betrayed,
 Now Juliet's voice is so demure and low.

Only her father thinks the wench is sly,
 And sees in her docility her treason ;
 She loves the truth he thought she must deny,
 Her lyric to the music of his reason.

THE GORGON

Donald Davie

As madmen knock their heads against a wall,
 We, in bad day-dreams, pinch ourselves awake ;
 More cunning still, some pinches make us fall
 Asleep, and dream there must be some mistake.

Equipped with this neat cushioning device
 As it were with a thermostat, the mind
 Protects itself. However you entice,
 Your mount must still refuse the jump, you'll find.

Baffled and spurring cruelly, the will
 Pretends at last the obstacle was cleared,
 But still betrays (the accent growing shrill)
 Imagination shied at what it feared.

Medusa's head would not bear looking at,
 Not for the harm it did you if you looked,
 But for the look it wore, and because that
 Was more than the imagination brooked.

The heroes did it all by mirrors then,
 The muses too. A later Gorgon broke
 Art's looking-glass in the explosion when
 Men's eyes were running down their cheeks like yolk.

IN PRAISE OF COSMETICS

George Hartley

(For Iris)

Why do you spoil your beauty sleep to rise?
 For when you're tired you keep my flesh upright ;
 Your eyelids are a burden to your eyes
 But even when they're closed you look a sight.

For you, no maiden, keep the virgins blush
 By application of a little rouge
 And if I see red that is why you rush
 To clean off the mascara tears would smudge.

Synthetic beauty gained by great expense ;
 You take the veil and keep as fresh as paint
 But you're two-faced to wear such innocence,
 A martyr of desire you are no saint.

A NOVEL SITUATION

George Hartley

'Knowing some women whores, dares marry none.'—Donne.

Each word a probe, you would invite my fall,
 I see I have and have you as you were,
 The part (when I have done) becomes the whole ;
 I would indulge my whim for splitting hairs.

But now the pained audition of your smile
 Is proof against this kind of violence ;
 It seems I love the limbs that I defile
 And years of continence are no defence.

You told me just exactly what you thought
 But never are the equal of my deeds
 For now at last you have me by the throat,
 Shall I undress and find my fears are needs?

Love is where you find it, I'm often told,
 ' And when ' ? A question solved by patient art
 But dare I then presume to be so bold?
 ' What holds my hair is growing in my heart.'

And needing the reward yet bear the sin
 When all I dread is leaving you behind.
 Who opens a door knows if he's going in
 Still makes himself the measure of mankind.

You'll never boast my fall for I will go
 With no force to rape or attain your ends
 Though by some others you'll be laid as low ;
 I'll never have the art to make amends.

PRINCIPIA VIRTUTIS

George MacBeth

Hard thoughts drawn out, like drops of blood,
 Once reason strikes the veins of will,
 Prostrate swine's appetites in mud,
 Yet brace men's principles to kill.

Decision, that electric shout
 Beneath smooth currents of their choice,
 Precipitates no film of doubt,
 Nor leaves unmagnetised one voice.

Yet anode, cathode, understand,
 Resolve and shock, can only numb.
 One captive-bolt gun arms each hand
 While passions tremble, penned and dumb.

Once conscience fires, can duty's wheels,
 That move on hooks of praise and blame,
 Suspend emotions by their heels,
 Or strip the sin of pride with shame?

Dark fear affirms, pale faith rebuts.
 Yet virtue's force, though filtered thin,
 Still concentrates belief in guts :
 Men lose their heart, swine save their skin.

SEVEN DAYS TO ZERO

George MacBeth

A Method Of Ending The World In Thirteen Verses

1

Basic Propositions

At first a theory, conceived between
 Two rival views, inferring is from ought,
 Intuits ends, and weds them to one mean.

Later a principle, producing nought
 From two and one, with smooth arithmetic,
 Embodies limits in a form of thought.

Infinity seems out of place. One flick
 Of careless logic, which makes knowledge crude,
 Resolves all science to one simple trick.

2

Proof

The week begins by starting to conclude
 Upon the first day. Fashioning her trend
 She casts herself in the subjunctive mood.

The second day she moves towards her end.
 Smart physics come and help. No causal grounds
 Let penetrable particles extend

The geometric point, nor proper bounds
Of curving space destroy unspoken seals.
Air listens while arithmetic expounds.

The third day comes too fast. Her heavy peals,
Through chronic maladies, the hollow chime,
Weigh down eternity with cogs and wheels.

The fourth day telescopes. The glass of Time,
Reversing centuries, trains men to apes.
No missing link can reason or can rhyme.

The years run back. Embraces turn to rapes:
Frail hybrid monsters piteously cry
When gendered from the hell of coupling shapes.

The shapes own form. The beasts take root and die.
Yet sunlight on the fifth day withers form
To formless liquid in a fiery sky.

Fluid and substance, once the height and norm,
Dissolve to hydrogen that shrinks from sight,
Then swells in energy to sound and storm.

Six days fatigue. Weak energy, in flight,
Consumes her lightning in one flaming sheet,
And is exhausted, and goes out, with night.

The seventh day makes nothing seem complete.
This analytic statement of the end
Comes to an end, and nothing is more neat.

TO EROS

Kingsley Amis

If only we could throw you away,
 Garotte you, weight you, sink you in the bay,
 We could start living, we say.

Our girls would all relapse
 Back into girls — not all that bright, perhaps,
 But ever such decent chaps,

And when we took them out
 To the Bay View, 'Doris' we'd hear them shout ;
 'Six pints, please, and a milk stout.'

Should we have the sense to go on,
 Our labour chief, our thick-lipped roarer gone?
 Or should we re-enter upon

That boring welter of blue,
 And at last clear off, not to get shot of you,
 As heroes used to do,

But parching, fed at the oars,
 To nab some hodge with bum and scruff like yours
 And bundle him to these shores?

THIS AND THAT

Gordon Wharton

This one preferred the handshake to be tight,
 The frank dismissal and the blunt remark.
 Those whom he hated he did not invite.

All of his lovers bit upon his bark,
 But very few would stay a second night ;
 And if his breath smelt then they told him so.
 When the alarm clock rang they had to go.

And so, of course, not many topped the mark,
 This frowardness became for most too trite ;
 Their enmity being mounted in the dark.

That one preferred the gentle platitude,
 The smile of parting could not make him cry,
 Slept with the decorous woman, not the nude.

He realised the walls smelt of decay
 But they were papered and he would not brood.
 ' Wonderful party ' or ' Nice of you to ring ' ;
 The bandaged wound is not so harrowing.

Nobody loved him, but they all dropped by
 For conversation, some of them were rude.
 He knew his enemies and let them stay.

This one and that now meet and neither runs,
 Though this one trembles, squints his bandaged eyes,
 He is resigned and that one holds the gun.

INTERVENTION

Gordon Wharton

From the first a mystery prevailed ;
 On going to the hills men signalled down,
 ' Do not follow. Hunger. Mission failed.'

And lately with the Enemy on the town,
 Advancing swiftly along the pregnable dunes,
 The King absconded with a fearful frown

Pursued by bullets humming constant tunes
 That caught him by the vacant pier theatre
 Under the swinging Chinese lanterns.

And the humped shadows by the breakwater
 Sang gently to their guns. The nights were long :
 The wounded sentry dreamed of something better,

And the fixed stars looked tolerantly upon
 The locked wicket, the ramshackle pier
 And men pursuing right and going wrong.

Then from the hills a trumpet ánd a fear.
 The Adversary ran, the Saviours came, were asked
 ' What do you want? What are you doing here? '

So much has changed since the last powder fumes
 Died and unmasked those hills, these faces.
 When we go home shall we remember what assumes

The tourist's face upon the sands? Are there places
 Beyond Humiliation where trains run?
 Will the lamps be lighting unfamiliar faces?
 And can we finish what we have not begun?

THE CARYATID

Jonathan Price

One day in August to escape the heat
 I went to the museum. Cool, alone,
 I looked at Pueblo pots, and coins from Crete,
 And at a stooping woman carved in stone.

She came from Greece, so the inscription said,
 And once had stood beside a temple door.
 A diagram with dotted lines in red
 Showed what a mass her head and shoulders bore.

Of all that burden nothing now remained,
 So that her attitude seemed an expense
 Of energy for nothing, sinews strained
 Against themselves, hysterically tense.

I felt uneasy, standing in that place,
 And wished my touch could soften the cramped stone.
 Something about the posture, or the face,
 Reminded me of someone I had known.

CHIOS REVISITED

C. A. Trypanis

My childhood, like the sand-castles I built
 With flags and draw-bridges on this Aegean beach,
 Was flattened by a storm that left the silt
 Covered with salty litter. Today, to reach

Into the past, I dug the same soft sand.
 But the damp pebbles of the beach can feel
 The touch of childhood, they shun the adult hand
 That blindly flutes the wind, until the steel

Stars nail the night against the East.
 Though the harbour is still full of ships,
 And the warm moon, hurrying to a feast
 Halts over the red carnations and slips

Her arm in mine, I will sit tonight
 Like an Etruscan on the lid of a tomb blurred
 By time, and seal in carved stone the flight
 Of the past — my heart a painted bird.

SAILING TO AN ISLAND

Richard Murphy

The boom below my knees lifts, the boat
 Drops, the surge departs, departs, my cheek
 Kissed and rejected, kissed, as the gaff sways
 A tangent, cuts the infinite sky to red
 Maps, and the mast draws eight and eight across
 Measureless blue, the boatmen sing or sleep.

A cloud congeals above the windward island
 Whose distant halo shines for our desire.
 Seven hours we try against wind and tide
 Tack and return, making no headway.
 The northwest sticks like a knife in our teeth.
 There the hot O'Malleys, the Amazon women
 Daughters of pirate-queen Granuaile
 Who boarded a Turk with a blunderbuss,
 Comb red hair and assemble cattle.
 Across the sea's metallic groundswell
 Plumbed by the sun's kingfisher rod
 We sail late on a legend to Clare Island
 Whose blue hill floats in a sultry mirage,
 Long to approach to un wax our ears
 To shatter the monotonous croon of inner sirens
 Croaking like frogs in a steamy delta.
 We look for a bay of fishermen working with nets.
 Instead we coast by a treacherous rock
 An acropolis of greasy cormorants, an extinct
 Volcano where spiders spin, a purgatory
 Guarded by hags and bristled about with breakers.

The breeze as we plunge, like anger
 Stiffens, a fact real as the miles of sea
 Between us and land, between us and the island.
 The girl and the child vomit.
 She veers and bucks.
 There is no refuge on the gannet's cliff.
 We are at sea growing rough, with a old puckaun
 The boom spliced by an oar, fatal rigging,
 A helmsman happy but perfidiously unawake.
 You know what brought us, imaginary sirens
 Romance in an island of notorious ancestry
 The myth of a shrewd spitting brutal gunwoman
 Who piously endowed an abbey.
 Why did we wish to lash this legend

Fast to the gunwale like a dead cormorant?
 This is the boat that belched its crew
 Dead on the shingle in the Cleggan disaster :
 That was no dream the year I was born,
 No one but fools would invoke such danger.
 This is what frees me. At the worst
 I do not care. Sitting in the bows
 With coat and rugs at last I can watch
 In the glittering eyes fastened on a wave
 Bony knuckles clinging to the gunwale
 A purging myth meeting us like a gull.
 I wish my brother would resign the tiller
 To the boatman with shrill voice
 Of uneasy orders. I wish to sit still
 Drink tea from a thermos before the end.

Then the boom strikes the rising water,
 A squall fills the sails, she shudders.
 There is a loud cry of breaking timber
 But the mast is firm. There are no gods
 To thank. We lash the last oar. I cut
 Cords from the fishing-lines. The jib sheets
 Dancing like snakes, sting my cheek. At last
 She swings from the wind, and now we must accept
 The reality,
 We must abandon our lust for Clare Island,
 With storm under us straddle the angry
 Waters that draw no illusion to Inishbofin.

The bows rock as she overtakes the surge.
 We neither sleep nor sing nor talk
 Having moved beyond desire and self-disgust.
 We notice houses, Dutch barns, walls
 Dividing tillage, creating cubes of years
 Of labour, marriages, emigration, dying
 On the slopes of deforested hills, or west
 In islands fertile with seaweed and geese.
 What will the islanders think of our folly?

The whispering spontaneous reception committee
 Nods and smokes by the calm jetty.
 Am I jealous of these courteous fishermen
 Who hand us ashore, for knowing the sea
 Intimately, for understanding the storm
 That took nine of their men on a calm night

With the sudden impact of a bomb in peace?
 They make nothing of storms, hardly tell
 The story again. There is local pride
 In their home-built ships.
 We are advised to return next day by the mail.
 Still I am jealous, greedy for living
 The long night descent
 Belled by the hammerbeat of their songs.
 What residue of illusion makes me demand
 Are they happy in the monotony of boats
 Bringing their catch to Cleggan to drink,
 Cultivating fields, or retiring from America
 With enough to soak till morning or old age?

Disgust is regorged, and self-disgust.
 The survival of brutal innocence
 Laughs at our doubts with the fisherman's
 Carefree happiness.
 The myth is reborn in the randy song.
 The bench below my knees lifts, the floor
 Drops, the words depart, depart, with faces
 Blurred by the smoke. An old man grips my arm
 His shot eyes twitch, quietly dissatisfied.
 He has lost his watch, an American gold
 From Boston gas-works. He treats the company
 To the secretive surge, the sea of his sadness.
 I slip outside, fall among stones and nettles
 Crackling dry twigs on a dead tree.
 The voyage is over, the lies begin
 To totter on unfamiliar paths
 While an accordion drones above the hill
 Writing new myths in unanchored stars.
 I trip. There was the risk. There was that storm.
 With this sea-anchor to their simple fears
 I ride real waves, and curl sickly asleep.

COUNTRY OF MASKS

Iain Fletcher

A country of masks
 the half strange city of this face
 whose profile haunts between an arch,
 columns of the cave
 of the rock church
 where walls glow in the weighted air,
 vibrate
 with angels, with the long community of saints . . .

How many faces make a city?

But locked it seems,
 a trick of centuries,
 against tripper or pilgrim
 even the familiar inhabitant
 for what can break
 by gesture or groping word
 the sculptured assurance of its sleep,
 who flex an ear
 to catch the hanging echoes as they flake?

But say one found
 in a place harsh with use, some human place,
 a dead child's toy, a vase's shattered lips
 or any household thing
 that spells out humble loss,
 small grace, endearing blemish,
 might not the whole masked structure come alive
 and history repent
 the designed accident of fire,
 whatever choked this ground,
 and the grave eyes of the Madonna in the church
 open, and know her sons.

LYNN REGIS

Iain Fletcher

Languor of decay blankets this nostril of the fens.
 Streets peel off in dying members, buildings
 Singly die in smouldering brick, their windows,
 Dull coins bottling up an eye.

Ravaged with posters 'For Sale.' When did it all give way?
 When did the last anchor groan, the last wooden ship
 Tall over the town in a terrace of sails,
 Bulging with Oregon pine, pitchpine, unloading from Pensacola,
 Sadly sail northward?

A painter droops. Weeds sprawl along wharfage,
 Pushing past the torn fangs of the railway,
 Tear stone from stone in the wheelk-house. Silt stumbles
 Across the harbour.

Churches died first. Saint Margaret's fell
 And in the sharp light of Saint Nicholas
 A cupid lifts up withering arms, his smiling mouth
 A bed for spiders. A winged skull in a corner
 Laughs at nothing.

Here, neither past nor present. From *The Maids Head*,
 A trade address you might call it, *terminus technicus*,
 Lies whisper, where the sticky chromium bar
 Leers in fluorescence.

'Wonderful You,' the radio weeps — old crocodile tears
 For the foreign soldier, the adolescent girl,
 Who stranger to each other, find nothing strange
 In this town's death,

The human mind interprets a whole death
 In terms of the particular grimace. Pure hazard
 Heated by our rash dreams of order
 Melts into sequence.

A tired fiction. Well, this was a human city,
 Not the world of being, city of Cecrops or of God,
 Where mind pollinates the coldly open sky
 With old lost questions.

THE CUCKOLD

Anthony Hartley

Imagine a lover slipping through dark streets
 To the mulberry tree beneath his lady's window,
 Adventurously clambering on the branches
 In a passionate escalade. Then at the casement,
 Cramped on a narrow balcony,
 The three knocks given and the candle extinguished,
 He must lean outward from the opening shutters
 Before he steps inside.

With what desire
 Will not this cavalier feel himself fraught
 Under the covers, cupping his hollowed palm
 Round a firm breast, nipple between third and second fingers?
 With what endearing names will he not mouth her :
 ' My duck, my dainty-o, my anything,'
 While his tumescent flesh grows keen and hard,
 Moriturus te saluto, image of fondness,
 Inquisitor of unstressed reticence
 Lying on a bed of feathers.
 Very much later,
 After the usual number of turns and tosses,
 He will be too sleepy to notice her languorous shrug,
 To hear her hunch-backed husband behind the curtain
 Or the servant-girls giggling in the next room,
 And in the morning early will go on his way,
 Thinking: ' She loved me for my handsome face.'

So far in vanity, but it would be too wretched
 If a voice should whisper what might be the truth of the matter :
 ' Foolish amorist, lying there in a stupor,
 Don't you realise you are going to be a donor?
 Don't you know what they are doing to you and your strong back?'
 This is vehement, but, stopped suddenly dead,
 He might think: ' If she had smiled one time,
 Shuddered another, it would have turned out better,
 Eros more constant.'
 So for a little while
 He is perplexed in the motion of guttering lamps,
 Then with a bare shake of the head strides off,
 Bravely affronting the October mists.

A BALLAT O FAT MARGIE

Tom Scott

(frae Villon)

Gin I shud saerve the bewtie I waled oot,
 Whit richt hae fowk t caa me rogue or fuil?
 She has her pairts at bottom, mak nae dout:
 For her I ride the ring an bear the bill.
 Whan gents come in, I rin an set the table,
 Fetch wine on tip-tae, sae's t mak nae din,
 An bring the braed, fruit, cheese an waater in.
 Gif they pay weill, I tell them aa an ane:
 'Remember, sirs, whan ye've an edge t grind,
 This huirshop whaur, consort an queen, we reign.'

But whiles the shoe is on the tither fuit,
 Whan I find she's pit naethin in the till.
 I glower at her wi a murderous hate,
 An tak awa her boddice, dress an girdle,
 Sayan they'll dae at laest t pey the meal.
 She breenges up at this, an sweirs bi Satan
 An Christ himsel (Wha saved us aa frae sin),
 She'll see me daed first. Syne, I grab a spuin
 An bleed her neb, t mind her we're aye in
 This huirshop whaur, consort an queen, we reign.

Peace made, she fluirs me wi a thunderous fairt,
 Mair pisonous nor onie dung-gorged beetle;
 Lauchs, sits down on ma waim an feels ma pairt;
 Says 'Gow on,' giean ma middle-leg a puhll.
 Fair drunk, we sleep lik logs whaur I first fell.
 At dawn, her randie quim complainin syne,
 She clim on me afore the sun can dwyne.
 Eftar a rub or twa I groan wi pain;
 Her weicht fair spyles whit little pleasure's mine,
 In this huirshop whaur, consort an queen, we reign.

Villain, ye've made yir bed, come rain or shine.
 Is nymph til satyr no a guid match then?
 Lecher an huir shuld set ilk ither fine,
 Like til like — bad rat bi bad cat taen.
 Oor love o filth aye peys us oot in kind.
 Nou aa deserts us, wha desertet Yin,
 For this huirshop whaur, consort an queen, we reign.

MANNEQUIN

Lawrence P. Spingarn

Announce this pictured promise to your friends.
 Proclaim the face no face, but legend's glass
 For street and stall where work and worry pass,
 Where love keeps plump and green on dividends.
 Turn the slick pages to her countenance
 Between the cold cream ad, a recipe
 For Christmas pudding. Mutes from Tartary
 Counsel her elongated radiance
 Against tomorrow's haste, next week's excess,
 The tempting cocktail in a midtown bar,
 Features gone haggard and crepuscular,
 Ashes and powder tumbling down her dress.
 In a tureen of manners she revives
 At liquid day her hard and splendid core.
 She flees from history with a semaphore
 Flashing her dictates to suburban wives.
 She preens a myth for women, who achieve
 Detachment from the fire in the skies
 And count the wounded with astonished eyes
 Or hands that find no hunger to relieve.
 Depict her in an astrakhan, a cape,
 Gloves from the birds burying their chosen heads
 And Austral pearls from shark-infested beds :
 She touches royalty in every shape.
 Her skin is reticent. Do not profane
 Her waiting ear with whispers of regret.
 Delicate, dainty, molded in a net,
 She stares through crinkling sheets of cellophane.
 Diet has slimmed her to a nice perfection,
 Envy of callow girls, despair of age ;
 St. Agnes-like, and martyred in a cage,
 She primps for lions and the crowd's affection.
 Forbidden labor in the couch of birth
 And kept from any traffic with the ground,
 She rides insouciant on the wheel-go-round,
 The hag of fashion for your shilling's worth.
 But time will flock the serpents to her head :
 Medusa, who has lured men to her lair,
 And widow with no darker cloth to wear,
 She reads the hour, and drinks herself to bed.

FOR ERASMUS, A GOLDEN HAMSTER

Qwentin Stevenson

In the London suburb where when I was small I lived
 Children were given as a matter of honoured custom
 Some household pet on whom to unload their affection,
 All except us. Was it that my parents believed
 That animals naturally tended towards evil
 Or that the love given to ensure their survival
 Could better be used on them? Whatever it was they behaved
 As if keeping a pet was a bad-mannered habit
 Like picking one's nose. Of course we never believed it ;
 We knew quite well when we played at a friend's that his tame
 Mouse was a sure sign of social superiority
 Although as we watched we scoffed out of filial piety.
 So you, Erasmus, golden perhaps when born but since splashed
 dirty
 Are only my way of losing a sense of inferiority
 That has haunted me ever since the reply to our snub came :
 ' Anyway I bet you'd love one just the same.'

EPITAPH AT DEKELEIA

Thomas Ansell

The first comedian of the classic age
 Was Skirôn who, robber of Megaris,
 For unsuspecting travellers would stage
 A one-act play upon the precipice.
 These knelt to wash his feet and with a quick
 Lunge of his leg found death in the ravine :
 Effective art learned by a simple trick
 And a most rapid exit to each scene.

Wise traveller ! be warned and do not kneel
 Before the feet of highwaymen ; make sure
 Humility is not mistaken zeal
 Or the employ of it a sinecure ;
 Remember always that pernicious thrust
 Which laid, alas ! so many in the dust.

THE POEM HAS A PURPOSE

Norman Nicholson: *The Pot Geranium*. (78 pp. Faber, 9/6)

MR. NORMAN NICHOLSON has never quite gained the recognition that his work deserves, yet his 'poetic landscape,' because it is compact, deep rooted in the land, and continually operating upon both naturalistic and symbolic levels, is one of the most important of any poet today. Like some of the 'Fugitives,' he derives strength from a regional culture without ever becoming in any sense parochial; indeed his 'regionalism' is so contrived as to be 'universal' in implication and appeal. His Cumbrian landscape is a perfect 'correlative' for his vision of the human situation.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Cumberland and Millom are the only points of departure in Nicholson's work. Though from these points he constantly arrives at poignant and pregnant statements of universal values, he will sometimes achieve his end by other routes. In his new book there are several methods of attack, including the use of the Persona, (*Innocents Day*, *A Turn for the Better*) the Allegory (*The Outer Planet*, *The Seven Rocks*), and the Astronomical Meditation (*The Unseen Centre*, *The Undiscovered Planet*, *The Expanding Universe*). The poetic personality, however, never alters. There is a tremendous impression of integrity, artistic and moral, behind these poems, and a power as direct, bold and simple as so many aspects of the Cumberland scene. The statements have stature, and the form of each poem is invariably one with the vision. Thus we have the simple, direct opening of *The Orphan* with its effective recalling of Herrick.

' Here in a cot of earth I stand —
Earth rails me in on every hand —
Walls of sandstone, walls of slate,
Through which I see as through a gate
The slats of fellside, taut and tall
That gave the stone to build them all.'

The discipline of his work has not outlawed exuberance and vitality, however; the poems are rich in memorable phrases; the scenes are observed with humour as well as tenderness and sincerity.

' But now when the roofs are sulky as the dead,
With a snuffle and sniff in the gullies, a drip on the lead:
No wind at all, and the street stone-deaf with a cold in the head.'
(Weather Ear)

Humour is never present purely for its own sake; there are no merely pyrotechnic poems; words are never wasted. Nicholson keeps to the resolution expressed in the poem *On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday*.

' There is no time now for words
Unless the words have meaning; no time for poetry
Unless the poem has a purpose . . .'

The purpose, the single purpose, shines through these poems. The superb humanity of the pictures of Children, and Old Men ; the dramatic and powerfully symbolic sketches of streets, quarries, boathouses, and railway stations ; the humour and poignancy of such flawlessly made poems as *Rising Five* (perhaps the best poem in the 1953 PEN Anthology): these are all contributory to a unified, Christian, but by no means sectarian, vision, arising from a knowledge and love of a region of England which is (we are now persuaded) one of the most productive of universal symbols. It is to be hoped that the accidents of poetic fashion, now popularising a donnish fastidiousness, irony and wit, will not prevent anyone in search of poetry of real and lasting significance from turning, not only to *The Pot Geranium*, but also to the earlier volumes. He will find there work built to stand the test of time, poems that will be remembered long after many of our current 'Names' and fashions are lost in the general heading, 'Twentieth Century ; minor tendencies.'

Robin Skelton.

Fighting Terms, Thom Gunn. (Fantasy Press, 8/6)

Soldiers Bathing, F. T. Prince. (Fortune Press, 6/-)

MR. GUNN'S first collection is welcome, even though 8/6 is rather a lot to pay for twenty-five poems, excellently printed but poorly bound. Nevertheless, it is very much required reading, for Mr. Gunn is, I would say, by far the most promising of the Neo-Academics, or the University Wits, or whatever one calls the school of poets whose work has been published during the last two or three years by the Fantasy Press and the University of Reading. Unlike most of these poets, whose debt to Empson or Auden or Graves is only too obvious, Mr. Gunn's verse shows no visible influences at all ; in fact, his is the first really original voice to have appeared in English poetry for a long time. His poems are formal, yet colloquial, in a clipped, almost brutal, way, and the recurrent harshness of diction must be intentional, for in an interview recently published in a Cambridge magazine, Mr. Gunn stated that he spent a good deal of time working on each poem.

In content, most of the poems in *Fighting Terms* are love-poems, or at least about love in some way. The attitude to love expressed in Mr. Gunn's poetry is curious, and extremely interesting. He does not treat of Love as spiritual yearning, carnal possession, or mutual harmony, but rather of Love as War, as Politics, as Strategy :

' And love is then no more than a compromise?

An impermanent treaty waiting to be signed

By the two enemies?

— While the calculating Cupid feigning impartial blind

Drafts it, promising peace, both leaders wise

To his antics sign, but secretly double their spies.'

This almost suggests the Sex War *à la* James Thurber, though here the conflict comes during courtship rather than after it. The titles of

some of the poems: 'La Prisonnière,' 'The Court Revolt,' 'Captain in Time of Peace,' the title of the book itself, show how consistent is Mr. Gunn's preoccupation. In his vigorous and assertive masculinity — though only in that respect — he recalls Mr. Roy Campbell. Mr. Gunn is predominately the poet of what Fr. D'Arcy and others have called *animus*: the male principle in the human soul, that needs but does not understand the corresponding feminine *anima*, alternatively wooing and brow-beating her. Since most poets are a bit androgynous — in their work, at least — this unabashed maleness of Mr. Gunn's is rather welcome; yet it is in many ways a limiting factor, a potential narrowing of the range of sensibility. At the moment his characteristic *persona* is a perturbed, ruttish, dumb-ox type, like the young soldier in his poem 'Lofty in the Dance Hall.' This figure is an agreeable change from the narcissistic, vapourish protagonist of many young poets, but he could still become rather tiresome. Whether the kind of attitude that has produced him is an abiding part of Mr. Gunn's sensibility, or merely a phase of his personal development, I would not care to discuss. At all events, it has given a fresh and distinctive note to the poetry in this accomplished collection. One can only await future developments.

Mr. Prince is a good deal older than Mr. Gunn, and his first book of poems appeared in 1938. This second collection, which has been so long awaited, is vaguely disappointing; perhaps because it contains so little. The title-poem is already — and rightly — well known: a noble meditation on War, on Art, and, ultimately, on the Crucifixion, by a cultured Christian humanist, involved as an officer in the last war, watching his men bathing in the sea at evening. This is followed by a group of love poems. As other reviewers have already remarked, the influence of Donne is here uncomfortably strong:

I who was arrogant before I met you,
Because I was to meet and love and get you,
Now I have met you, loved and got you, find
A new humility of mind . . .

They are very far from being mere imitative exercises, for they convey a true and profound emotion, but I cannot help feeling that they would have been better poems if Mr. Prince had not stayed so resolutely in the shadow of the 'Songs and Sonnets.' Both tone and feeling (in Dr. Richard's technical sense) are too much John Donne's and too little Mr. Prince's. The two long poems that follow, 'The Old Age of Michelangelo' and 'Apollo and the Sybil,' are in many respects impressive, though I am not sure if their extent is equal to the imaginative impulse behind them. But they contain passages of very beautiful writing. The book concludes with some translations from St. John of the Cross into a Crashavian stanza-form. They are skilfully done, although their interest is perhaps an antiquarian rather than a properly poetic one. St. John may be untranslatable, anyway, especially if one is to go by Mr. William Merwin's recent strictures in the *Kenyon Review* on Mr. Campbell's version. I was, incidentally, disappointed that 'The Life of the Virgin,' a long and remarkable poem that Mr. Prince published in *The Month* in

1949, was not included in this collection. If he decided to delete it in a fit of excessive self-criticism, it is a pity that some kind friend was not at hand to persuade him to put it back again.

Bernard Bergonzi.

The Holy Stone, Thomas Blackburn. (The Hand and Flower Press, 4/6)

SOMETIMES a writer may set the highest value on his best intention. Certainly Mr. Blackburn has taken the title of his book from one of his less interesting achievements: there is better stuff here than *The Holy Stone*. This playlet, like the longer one, *The Voyage Out*, deals with the same themes as are found in some of the shorter poems. Several of the latter contain the character of the murderer, Aramain, who particularly interests Mr. Blackburn, and who appears in the different settings of the two playlets. A number of the short poems are difficult. Nobody minds this in a poem if the rewards for overcoming it are commensurate with the difficulty of reading it; but in the two playlets the obscurity is a matter of inferiority. And yet at first glance they look easier.

This paradox may be resolved if we look at Mr. Blackburn's method in the shorter, more successful poems thematically related to the playlets. They aim to define a concept or state of mind of some complexity, such as that of guilt; and they define by evocation.

'But from the sea in a thrashing line,
Aramain saw those men he'd drowned
Climb like fishes towards his knees,
Till their dripping bodies hemmed him round,
And "Master," they mewed, "we freeze, we freeze,"
Then stared at his face and made no sound.'

The effect gained here is what another critic has called a 'moral shudder.' The lines are from one of the simpler poems in the Aramain group. The verse of the poems which deal with more complex ideas is, naturally, relatively more complex in its imagery. If the verse is simplified it is liable to become inadequate in the way that a prose paraphrase of a poem is inadequate. Meaning is not clarified, but just lost.

This is what happens in the playlets. Here, with his protagonists appearing as Characters, and his verse less complex, Mr. Blackburn becomes really obscure. The verse is too thin to support the weight of meaning which is clearly supposed to be there. Reference to an explanatory preface, or a quick check-up on one's classical mythology, is no help at all. The characters and their significances remain, for the most part, in a kind of algebraic relationship to each other. The symbolism seems tacked on from the outside, not a natural extension of the verse, which lapses from diffuseness into flatness, and even into pointless vulgarity.

Most of the poems in this collection are free from these faults. It would be hard to claim any great originality for Mr. Blackburn. But if

he does not widen our conception of the possibilities of verse, he does give his reader variety, and excites him enough to make him read a poem several times when it is not clear at first. A line like

I am the resurrection of my dead

is inspired by wit ; and it can be said that Mr. Blackburn, though always (as here) serious, seldom becomes solemn or stuffy. There are at least half-a-dozen poems here (among them *The Villain*, *A Visit Home*. 1, *The Child* and *The Maze*) which may be added to the good minor poetry one remembers. And that, after all, is saying quite a lot.

Jonathan Price.

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